



## Willie Jenkins Oral History Interview, June 24, 1983

### Title

“Willie Jenkins Oral History Interview”

### Date

June 24, 1983

### Location

Location Unknown.

### Summary

Willie Jenkins first started working for the railroad in 1939 as a summer job in Mississippi. He had two years of college. He came to Portland in 1942 and worked as a waiter on the train until retiring in 1979. Jenkins talks about improvements made by the union, but also corruption of some union officers who were stealing union the dues they collected. He also describes sleeping conditions in the dining car and recalls the story of meeting his wife on the train when she was a passenger. Jenkins recounts some incidences when people were hit and killed by trains he was working on, and the experience of being trapped on a train in a flood. Jenkins also talks about service related jobs being taken over by white employees and his views that black youths of the day are unwilling to learn their jobs and don't show interest in their work. He advises young people to get a good education and to consider working in the culinary business.

### Interviewee

Willie Jenkins

### Interviewer

### Website

<http://scarc.library.oregonstate.edu/oh29/jenkins/>

## Transcript

**Unknown Speaker:** We got a director over here [laughter].

**Willie Jenkins:** They're doing pretty good with this thing, but the director's telling them what to do.

**Interviewer:** Okay. And sir, when did you first come in contact with the railroad?

**WJ:** 1939.

**Interviewer:** What caused you to come in contact with them? How—define your first contact with them; what happened?

**WJ:** My first contact was by working with peoples that had worked with the railroad, and they got me a summer job.

**Interviewer:** A summer job, was that in Mississippi, sir?

**WJ:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** Okay. When did you first come to Portland?

**WJ:** 1942.

**Interviewer:** And what caused you to come to Portland?

**WJ:** Well, I came to Los Angeles and I didn't like it and I thought I'd live in Portland better. I liked Portland better.

**Interviewer:** What was your first impression of Portland back in 1942?

**WJ:** Well, it was very—

**Interviewer:** Was that before or after Pearl Harbor?

**WJ:** That was before—I mean after Pearl Harbor. It was very interesting to me. I liked the people, the contact that you could make with people.

**Interviewer:** What about the people? What was it about the people that—

**WJ:** It's more family in general. Just a group of people together.

**Interviewer:** You talking about—

**WJ:** Which was different.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. The blacks?

**WJ:** Yeah, uh-huh. We was all centrally located, so you didn't have to go too far to get in contact with them.

**Interviewer:** What part of the town were you living in?

**WJ:** Benton.

**Interviewer:** That's over here by where the Holiday Inn is?

**WJ:** Just off of Broadway across from Beacon [spelling?] Transfer Company. 1443 Northeast Benton.

**Interviewer:** Okay, alright. And sir, what was your job on the railroad?

**WJ:** Waiter.

**Interviewer:** Waiter?

**WJ:** Uh-huh.

**Interviewer:** Define what did you do as a waiter for the railroad?

**WJ:** I waited on people. That was it. I had a four and a [00:02:02 unintelligible] we called it, which was four people on one side and then two on the other side. So I had to take care of both of those tables.

**Interviewer:** How did you take care of them?

**WJ:** To the best of my knowledge.

**Interviewer:** But how did you? What did you do, how—

**WJ:** I waited on them and gave them the service that they wanted me to perform.

**Interviewer:** This is in food service.

**WJ:** Yes, in food service.

**Interviewer:** Okay. Sir, what were some of the major changes that occurred in the railroad while you were there? The major changes that occurred?

**WJ:** Seen quite a few. When I first came to work, we'd always work for thirty dollars a month, and then about six months after I started working we got a raise which was sixty dollars a month. Then the union came in and they got better, which we was getting used by the union but we still got a better pay. And then we began to get layovers that we appreciated. And then you—all later years you started getting vacations, which none of us had never heard about.

**Interviewer:** So why do you feel that the union used the employees?

**WJ:** Well we had a lot of people working for the union at that time; you pay your union dues and instead of them sending in to the union, actually would keep it. That's why I say that we was being used. We was being used by individuals. Not by the union; we was being used by the individual.

**Interviewer:** Did that ever come to light? Did that ever—

**WJ:** Oh yes, yes it came to light.

**Interviewer:** And there was some prosecution?

**WJ:** Yeah, well there wasn't no prosecution but there was some peoples that was put out of office that was in office, had been in office for a long time.

**Interviewer:** Can you think of any other changes that occurred while you were on the railroad other than the increasing wages?

**WJ:** Yes, there are quite a few. After—well see, when I started working for the railroad we were sleeping in the dining car. In the car on the floor, in the car.

**Interviewer:** On the floor?

**WJ:** No, we wasn't sleeping on the floor, what I say like this: when the car close at ten o'clock or eleven o'clock at night you had to get your bed out of the possum belly, which was a deal under the car. Then if you had a cot you put it on it, which most of the time the cooks only one that had the cots. Waiters had to put their bedroll on the chair or something. If there are enough chairs then that's where you slept. If you didn't, you put it wherever you could and sleep in that. But after

the union got in then we got to the place where we could demand some things; started giving us dormitory cars where we can go up and each one had a bed in the car where he can go to sleep at night and have a comfortable night's rest, anyway.

**Interviewer:** Did you, were you on the road quite a bit? Were you on the road a lot?

**WJ:** Yes, quite a bit.

**Interviewer:** From here—from where to where?

[00:05:06]

**WJ:** I ran from here to Denver, here to San Francisco, from Los Angeles here, and from here to Ogden, and to Chicago.

**Interviewer:** When you say you ran, after you arrived at your designated point, did you, you know, get off and see the city much and things?

**WJ:** Sometime we had a chance to do that, and sometime you didn't. That was all dependent on what the affair was. If you had a—now during the war if you had a soldier special coming out, you go into San Francisco, you get in at ten o'clock, you probably have to leave at twelve, quick as you could stock up and come right back again. You didn't get no rest. In San Francisco we used to get in—I was working for Southern Pacific—we used to get in at nine o'clock and due in at nine o'clock in the morning, not due out until nine at night, but we didn't have no quarters to go take a shower or relax or nothing. You just had to stone around the street until your time come to go back to work, you know. And then that's where you mess up [laughter].

**Interviewer:** Well sir, the 1942 when you first came to Portland, is that also the year when you started with the railroad? What year did you start working for the railroad?

**WJ:** Oh, I started working on the railroad at, I start—well, I've said '42 because I started in January of '40—I mean December '41, but I came to Portland '42.

**Interviewer:** Oh, I see. And sir, how much schooling have you had?

**WJ:** Two years of college.

**Interviewer:** How many children do you have, Mr. Jenkins?

**WJ:** Four.

**Interviewer:** Okay. And where were your parents born, sir?

**WJ:** In Mississippi. Now, somewhere in the area of Belzoni. I don't know exactly where.

**Interviewer:** Both your mom and dad?

**WJ:** Mom and Dad. My daddy was born in a little town called Lamkin, which is about eighteen miles south of Belzoni.

**Interviewer:** Okay. And sir, how many children—do you have any brothers and sisters?

**WJ:** No, I'm an only child.

**Interviewer:** You're an only child?

**WJ:** Only child.

**Interviewer:** Okay. Is there anything special about your years on the railroad that stands out in your mind? What is the most memorable experience you've ever had on the railroad? Now that you can sit back and reflect.

**WJ:** I have quite a few but I couldn't compare one with the other, you know, because my most memorable experience and the one that I appreciate mostly was when I met my wife on the railroad.

**Interviewer:** Why don't you tell us about that? [Laughter from several voices].

**WJ:** That's the one that I appreciated more than anything in the world.

**Interviewer:** How did you meet her?

**WJ:** I was coming in one morning and I went back to...went back to make the call for breakfast and she was sitting up sleep and I looked at her and she looks like her brother, which is Maloy Davis [spelling?], which he and I had worked together for a long time; he served cook with the Union Pacific. At that time, I was working for Burlington Northern, so when I come through the car and looked at her I kept on through and come back, and I says "are you going to have breakfast this morning?" She says "no." I said "well, are you sure? You're sitting up there looking like your brother, why don't you come over there and eat something?" She said "how you know my brother?" I said you look just like him, my lord. Come on, have breakfast." She said "I don't want nothing." I said "okay" [laughter].

So I come on back, I make the call and go on back to the car and when I come, she went upstairs. We had the dome cars then. She went upstairs, so I couldn't find her. I'm going back looking for her specifically, you know. So, when I did find her, when I did find her she was upstairs. "Come on down here, have breakfast." "No, I don't want nothing." I said "okay." I said "are you going over to your brother's house this morning?" She said "yeah." I said "where they stay?" "I don't know, but I'll find it." I said "okay" [laughs]. So...

**Interviewer:** So it was love at first sight, huh? [Laughter].

**WJ:** No, not love at first sight, but appreciation at first sight [Laughter]. That was in November, '54, wasn't it, baby?

**Mrs. Jenkins:** Mhmm.

**WJ:** So, when she got out, got off of the car, I said "well I'm going, I live not too far from your brother. Can I take you to your brother's house?" "Yeah, I'll go." So a friend of mine, MacMillan [spelling?], was right down the street. He had the car, so he went and got his car and brought it back and we come to the station, I says, "well, you get in the front. Cold as it is, you can always sit in the front, you'll be warm." She says "no, you get in it, you get in the front, I'll sit in the back." So, and really she didn't know where her brother lived. I brought her by her brother's house that morning, she was surprised to know that he was living there. He had moved from where she thought he was. So that's the most memorable thing. I mean, it's one that I appreciate.

**Interviewer:** Can you think of something else that occurred when you was working on—what experience? Like one man said that he remembered when they ran over a flock of sheep.

[00:10:07]

**WJ:** Yeah, I can remember things like that, but that was so common, that wasn't no experience; that was just a daily run. From here to Seattle you'd run over a flock of cows every day, so that wasn't no experience. When you get up to Kelsaw, if you didn't get through there before eleven, before ten-thirty, you knew you was going to hear some cows coming across the tracks, but that didn't make no difference. But the most amazing thing, which I regret all the time, was we hit a baby. Hit a lady with a little Volkswagen coming out of Kent Washington one morning. And they killed her instantly and they killed the baby too but they didn't find that baby for about an hour and a half later, and they took the baby and the mama to Harborview Hospital, and the husband worked there. That was the most shocking thing to ever happen to me, you know. Then I had another deal up here at the...coming out of a turn up at Stevenson Washington, guy was going fishing, he walking across the track, hit him, knocked his head off, and I come back, we backed up and I saw his head laying, and the body over there. That's kind of hard to look at, you know.

**Mrs. Jenkins:** The slide. Tell them about the slide.

**WJ:** Oh, that, we had—once we was, it was two specials out coming out of Spokane. This is just before Christmas, and have them at Roosevelt Washington. We went through there, it was snow all over everything. We go to Spokane, pick up our crew, come back, one train stopped, the other's right behind it, and they had a Chinook Wind up there, and the snow melted all at once. Had a flood. Stopped us at a little town called Roosevelt Washington which had one store, and they bought that store out before we got in there, and we sat up there for three days. And the water ran off, we still couldn't go nowhere because the tracks was washed out. That was just before Christmas. They sent in, oh they sent in the planes and dropped food and everything for us. That was very dramatic because, you know, I appreciated that. So after Christmas, see the last thing they dropped was a Christmas tree.

**Interviewer:** From the plane?

**WJ:** From the plane. And we left that night. [Laughter]. They got the roads together, we went, left that night. But it was nice though, and we had a lot of fun up there because ran out of food, we didn't have no work. We didn't have nothing to do, just sit around. I enjoyed all that [laughter].

**Interviewer:** Mr. Jenkins, how many years did you work on the railroad?

**WJ:** Thirty-two. Worked two years longer than I intended to work. I didn't intend to work but thirty. I worked thirty-two.

**Interviewer:** And did you retire from it, Mr. Jenkins?

**WJ:** Yes, I retired 1979.

**Interviewer:** Well you know Mr. Jenkins, during the time that you worked there, or rather in the 1960s, black people advocated other black people not to take those kind of jobs like Red Cap and working on the railroad, and now we have a situation where those jobs are being taken over, or have been taken over by Caucasians.

**WJ:** That's right.

**Interviewer:** Do you think we cut our nose off to spite our face?

**WJ:** That's exactly what we did, sugar. What we did, we went into something like this; we didn't go far enough to get into the power structure of it. What we did is went in in one little thing; "I got it all now." You couldn't teach nobody nothing, you know. I went to school for what I learned, what little I learned. I got, took an extension course from La Salle University and I got a degree where I'm a waiter anywhere I want to go; hotel management. But at the time that I took that, I was stupid too because I waited too long to take it, when I got it I'm too old to do it. Now, the average person of us, we go into something, it's like I've had waiters come in and you teach them how to set up table, set up the dining room and put a cup and saucer on the table. He know everything, ain't nothing that you can tell him, see. You can't tell him nothing then. He know what he's doing. That's where the Caucasians are getting ahead of us. I worked for Amtrak, J.B. Annison [spelling?], myself, Greg Rafford [spelling?], three oldest people out of Portland, we're the only three that's working. They'd always give us a new Caucasian to train. The minute we trained him they'd send him on a Chicago run or to Denver, somewhere, anywhere, and give him the top jobs that we got. And the man that's been there twenty years, he's doing the same thing he was doing before, see? Because them fellas come in, he try to learn the job, learn all the specs of the job. The black come in, only thing he want to know is "what am I supposed to do now?" and he forget everything else. That's what hurt us.

[00:15:30]

And then another thing; when them jobs wasn't paying anything, the Caucasians didn't want them. The minute they started being paying something, here you go. Now, I know I used to shine shoes. White wouldn't—you wouldn't catch a white boy shining those shoes, and now he's shining shoes both hands, everywhere, because it's good money. I was shining shoes for a quarter; he's shining shoes for a dollar. See what I'm talking about? That's just the way—now the whole thing I think about it is that I may be facetious or something like that, but I think that we just let all the jobs slip away from us our self, because we didn't put enough interest in it when we had it. That's all I can say.

**Interviewer:** Well sir, what advice do you have for today's young adults?

**WJ:** Get you some brains, get some sense, get some education and try to do anything. Culinary business is good. They're one of the best jobs in the world. You can get a job doing that when the Depression is on. People going to eat and you going to have a job. But if you don't know nothing about the job, you cannot protect yourself with the job. Get all the sense you can, learn everything you want to do. If you're going to go into, learn everything about it that you can learn. And put it in the right perspective.

**Interviewer:** Is there anything else you'd like to say about the railroad now when nineteen—it's been about four or five years since you retired, sitting in your comfortable chair here at home?

**WJ:** And working hard [laughs]. Don't forget sugar, I still work hard.

**Interviewer:** Still work hard.

**WJ:** Every day.

**Interviewer:** Every day.

**WJ:** I have to do that to keep from staying home cooking for Cassie [spelling?], because see Cassie gets real hefty when I don't have her meals ready and be home, so I'd rather be working [laughter from several voices], trying to figure out what's next.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**WJ:** But she's alright, that's my partner, my [00:17:33 unintelligible] [laughter].

[end of interview 00:17:36]